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ABSTRACT

This brief describes efforts to get an accurate picture of the current labor market for principals. Three projects were commissioned: an analysis of existing data on the national supply and career paths of school administrators; surveys of 83 school districts, supplemented by Common Core of Data information, to examine dimensions and implications of the labor market for principal candidates; and examination of research on the attributes and career paths of New York state principals and implications for policy. Researchers investigated whether there is a nationwide shortage of certified candidates, whether certain types of districts find it more difficult than others to attract certified candidates, personal and professional characteristics and career paths of people entering the field, and how state policies, local conditions, hiring practices, and job incentives affect districts' ability to attract a broader, potentially more able, pool of candidates. Results found no statistical evidence of a nationwide shortage of certified principal candidates. Districts and schools perceived as having the most challenging working conditions, large concentrations of impoverished or minority students, lower per-pupil expenditures, and lower salaries found it hardest to attract principals. Hiring practices and common search criteria were compounding districts' problems in attracting enough principal candidates capable of living up to heightened expectations for academic performance. Policy implications are noted. (Contains 28 endnotes.) (SM)

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A Policy Brief by The Wallace Foundation

BEYOND THE PIPELINE:

Getting The Principals We Need, Where They Are Needed Most

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This policy brief was produced as part of a commitment by The Wallace Foundation to develop and share knowledge aimed at strengthening the ability of principals and superintendents to improve student learning. The Foundation commissioned three independent research efforts to analyze the current labor market for principals, pinpoint the extent and root causes of the problems some districts and schools are experiencing in attracting candidates for the principalship, and indicate how policies and practices might better address those problems. This brief synthesizes the findings and policy implications from those three studies.

This brief was produced through the collective efforts of communications, evaluation and program staff at The Wallace Foundation and was written by Lee D. Mitgang, the Foundation's Director of Editorial Services.

"Nation's Schools Struggling to Find Enough Principals."[1]

—headline in The New York Times, September 2000

□

"...a shrinking pool of candidates is stepping up to accept the ever-increasing demands and expectations of school leaders, and school communities across the country are facing the challenge of what is to come."[2]

—report from the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, November 2002

□

Headline after headline, and study after study, have proclaimed that the nation faces an acute shortage of candidates for the principalship that almost certainly will worsen unless we find ways, in a hurry, to prepare many more to enter a dwindling job pool. The reasons that this belief is so widespread aren't hard to grasp. Never before has the bar been set so high for America's public education system to ensure that every child achieves at high levels. Nowhere does that bar seem higher than in struggling urban schools where the achievement gap tends to be greatest. Never have public schools counted more heavily on the nation's nearly 84,000 principals to lead the instructional improvements needed to meet tough new state and federal mandates. Never has the resulting need to assure an adequate supply of candidates for school leadership positions been clearer. Yet never have these increasingly challenging and often thankless jobs seemed less enticing, or more difficult to fill.

Add to that picture the following: the number of positions in education administration is expected to grow by as much as 20 percent in the next five years. Forty percent of current school leaders will be eligible to retire in the next six years.[3] The reported annual turnover rates of principals in states like Vermont, Washington, Kentucky and Texas, and in large districts like New York and Los Angeles, have already reached alarming levels — 20 percent or more in some places.[4]

The most frequent responses to this apparent shortage seem equally clear-cut. Districts increasingly are trolling for additional candidates using national advertising, Internet searches, or recruiting from neighboring districts. Many districts are also stepping up internal recruitment efforts and "grow-your-own-leader" strategies. Some are trying to lure

former principals out of retirement.[5] Still others advocate for expanding training programs. All hinge on the same belief: that the pipeline for the principalship is running dry, and steps must be taken to lure more candidates in.

None of these strategies is wholly unreasonable or divorced from reality. Certainly, some regions and some of the largest districts *are* experiencing difficulty in attracting sufficient numbers of candidates certified to fill vacancies and capable of leading the academic improvements that the times demand. And given the added national pressure to boost achievement levels, the skepticism many superintendents express about the caliber of candidates they do manage to attract is often warranted. A Public Agenda survey published in 2001 found, for example, that only one in three superintendents believes the quality of principals entering the profession has improved, 36 percent say it's stayed the same, and 29 percent say it's worsened. Nearly nine out of ten superintendents surveyed also agreed that wealthier districts "have an enormous advantage when competing for talent."[6]

Evidence from three new independent research studies provides another way of looking at the true nature, extent and underlying causes of the current problems in the labor market for principals. These studies, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, suggest that policies and practices aimed solely at adding more certified candidates to the pipeline miss the core challenges underlying the difficulty many districts are having in attracting and retaining high quality leaders. These challenges include inadequate incentives to draw high quality leaders to the neediest schools with the most difficult working conditions, counterproductive hiring practices, and regulatory hurdles. Taken together, the lack of initiatives to address these challenges is inhibiting efforts to attract enough qualified candidates to the very schools and districts that most desperately need them.

THE SHORTAGE RECONSIDERED

To get a more accurate picture of the current labor market for principals and to aid in the search for productive policies and practices, The Wallace Foundation commissioned three distinct but related research projects:

- An analysis by RAND Education of existing data on the national supply and career paths of school administrators (including the U.S. Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey, and the monthly Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics).[7]
- An analysis by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, drawing on a survey of 83 school districts and supplemented by the Common Core of Data from the National Center on Education Statistics. It examines the dimensions and implications of the labor market for principals, including: the supply and demand for principal candidates; which districts are having the most difficulty finding principals; a description of the quality and quantity of applicant pools in selected districts and regions; an analysis of how current perceptions of a shortage compare with seven years ago; how applicants match up to current educational demands; and how policies and practices affect the flow of candidates to schools that need them.[8]
- An examination by a research team at the University at Albany (SUNY) of the attributes and career paths of New York State principals and implications for policy, drawing on 30 years of statewide personnel data and other statistical sources concerning career paths and qualifications of prospective and current principals.[9]

None of these studies sought to address whether candidates who are "certified" under state law to apply for principal positions are also "qualified," in the sense of being fully up to the difficult task of successfully leading school improvement. Instead, the research teams sought to answer basic questions about the current labor market for the principalship:

1. Is there, in fact, a nationwide shortage of certified candidates?
2. Are certain types of districts finding it more difficult than others to attract certified candidates, and if so, why?
3. What are the personal and professional characteristics and career paths of people entering the principalship?
4. How are state policies, local conditions, hiring practices and job incentives affecting the ability of districts to attract a broader and potentially more able pool of candidates for the principalship? How might those policies and practices be improved?

Despite wide differences in methodologies and areas of focus, the RAND, University of Washington and University at Albany studies each arrived at remarkably similar conclusions on those key questions.

> Finding One: There is no statistical evidence of a nationwide shortage of certified candidates for the principalship.

Data gathered and analyzed in all three studies pointed to the identical finding: that nationwide, there are many more people presently certified to be school principals than there are jobs for them to fill.

The average number of applicants for principal job openings in the University of Washington survey of 83 districts in ten regions was 17, down slightly from the 19 these districts averaged seven years ago, according to data gathered from human resources offices. An average of 17 applicants per position hardly suggests a "crisis" or "national shortage," the report argues, *assuming enough of the candidates are qualified to meet the current demands of these jobs* (emphasis ours).[10]

The Albany study had this to say about the labor market in New York State: "Much has been made of an impending shortage of school leaders. Our analysis suggests that in some respects, the problem may not be as dire as previously suggested."[11]

RAND's analysis of national data on the characteristics of school administrators "reveals remarkable stability, and the changes that have occurred over time are not consistent with a national labor market in a state of crisis." It continued: "Despite concerns to the contrary, there appears to be no shortage of people who are officially qualified to assume (i.e., are *certified* for) school administrative positions."[12]

Nor is there evidence of an exodus of existing school administrators to other career fields, according to RAND. Between 1988 and 2000, roughly the same percentage of people entered school administration each year as left it. And most often those who exited left the labor force entirely or returned to teaching, the RAND analysis found.

Whether you look at national or individual state data, all three research teams agreed: there is no statistical evidence of a shortage of certified candidates for the principalship.

Finding Two: Districts and individual schools perceived as having the most challenging working conditions, large concentrations of impoverished or minority students, lower per pupil expenditures and lower salaries find it hardest to attract principal candidates.

While there is no evidence of a nationwide shortage of certified candidates, there is also no question that some districts, and some individual schools, are having real problems attracting enough qualified job seekers. High-growth regions, for example, are likely to report shortages, according to the UW study. Schools within large, problem-plagued districts — where school leaders must be willing to brave additional demands, challenging working conditions and inadequate incentives — tend to attract fewer candidates, with generally weaker credentials and less experience.

Low-performing schools in New York City are much likelier to end up with an inexperienced principal who attended a less competitive college, according to the Albany study.[13]

The 83 districts analyzed by the University of Washington researchers revealed wide disparities in the number of candidates per school. In some districts, schools typically averaged as many as 40 candidates for principal job openings. Others just a few miles away that were perceived as troubled drew fewer than three. In all regions studied, "the districts with the fewest applicants were those with the most challenging working conditions, higher concentrations of poor and minority students, and lower salaries for principals."[14] Furthermore, districts with the fewest applicants tended to pay the lowest salaries: $4,000 less for elementary principals, and about $11,000 less for secondary school leaders.

"Clearly," the UW report concluded, "financial incentives make a difference."[15]

UW researchers also found striking disparities *within* districts. In Philadelphia, for example, schools seen as academically competitive receive as many as 30 applicants for principal job openings, but the least preferred schools draw half a dozen or less for vacancies. The UW team found that elementary schools typically draw more applicants than high schools, where the student populations are seen as more challenging.[16]

Finding Three: Hiring practices and common search criteria are compounding the problems of districts in attracting enough principal candidates capable of living up to heightened expectations for academic performance.

All three studies reached the same conclusion: hiring practices and policies in many districts are making it significantly harder to expand the potential pool of high-quality candidates.

One symptom of these hiring practices, documented by all three research teams, is the graying of the principalship. According to RAND, between 1988-2000 the proportion of new principals under 40 shrunk dramatically, from 38 percent to only 12 percent.[17] The New York State study offers even more dramatic evidence: fully 66 percent of principals hired in 2000 were at least 50 years old.

When one considers that "in the public sector, principals tend not to remain in the principalship much beyond age 55,"[18] as the RAND research points out, it follows that this trend may create shorter careers in the principalship, exacerbating turnover.

"The principalship is an aging profession," wrote the RAND researchers, "not just because the people hired into administration positions 25 years ago are getting ready to retire, but also because many schools are hiring first-time principals who are already close to retirement age." "Our analysis suggests that the aggregation of local hiring decisions that typically place a premium on experience may be contributing to the situation," according to RAND. [19]

The UW study agrees that many human resource professionals "interpret the demand for improved quality as a call for more experience in education." That is consistent with national data showing that practically all principals (99.3 percent as of 2000) have been teachers and average 14 years' teaching experience – more than four times the minimum amount of experience required in most states.[20]

The RAND researchers noted that, "Formal barriers such as certification requirements and informal barriers such as district hiring practices all but exclude those without teaching experience from consideration for administrative positions. If policymakers are serious about drawing people from outside education into school administration, those barriers must be addressed."[21]

As the UW report sur arized it:

> "With greater pressure to hire quality candidates, human resource directors have not done what would be expected. They have not changed the criteria under which they hire; they have simply become more intent on meeting traditional criteria. More specifically, they seek candidates with lots of teaching experience, a state license or credential as a principal, and one or more stints as a building administrator, preferably in a comparable school and ideally in the hiring district. Candidates who meet all these criteria are normally older, some of them close to retirement age, meaning they, in turn, will shortly need to be replaced. The number of such older candidates with a track record of success as a principal, who also happen to be looking for a new position, is even smaller."[22]

This is by no means to suggest that "younger" necessarily means "better" in terms of the leadership capabilities one might expect from candidates for the principalship. Nonetheless, data revealing the aging of leadership candidates are cause for concern for at least two reasons. They demonstrate how district human resource practices are shrinking the pool of prospective candidates by equating "quality" almost entirely with "education experience." That, in turn, is compounding the "shortage" problem because those hired are often individuals who themselves may retire soon.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To summarize:
The fact that some districts, and some schools, are experiencing difficulty in attracting adequate pools of certified principal candidates is NOT the same as saying "there is a shortage of principal candidates." There is, nonetheless, a serious, unsolved dilemma in the labor market for the principalship: many credentialed or would-be candidates, both inside and outside the education field, either are not seeking jobs in the districts or schools that most need them — or are shunning leadership positions altogether. The stressful working conditions, inadequate job incentives, ineffective hiring practices, and increasingly formidable expectations for success, are deterring prospective candidates from entering the field.

How many willing and able candidates might be induced into school leadership if state and local policies and practices were changed? It's impossible to say. What seems certain from the research evidence, however, is that a more balanced set of policies is needed if all districts, and all schools, are to attract their share of school leaders with knowledge and skills that go above the minimums of certification.

Following are several policy implications that flow from the research, offered in the spirit of prompting further conversations and policy review:

- **Strategies focused solely on adding more certified people to the pipeline, such as opening or expanding training programs, or beefing up internal recruitment and mentoring programs won't, in and of themselves, solve the school leadership challenge.**

If, as these reports show, there is no shortage of certified candidates for the principalship, it makes little sense to rely on strategies aimed solely at adding more candidates to the pipeline. As the RAND report concludes: "Our analysis... does not argue for nationwide policies to attract more people into school administration."[23]

This is by no means to suggest that policies and resources aimed at attracting the best possible candidates or improving their professional preparation are inherently wasteful or unworthy. Nor is it to deny that particular schools or districts are experiencing genuine difficulties attracting candidates. It IS to say that merely pouring more, or even better-trained, candidates into school systems as currently organized and operated misses the real dilemma underlying what has been characterized as "the

shortage:" namely, that untold numbers of would-be candidates — both inside and outside the education field — are avoiding these jobs because of the challenging conditions, inadequate incentives, or regulatory hurdles.

- **Policies aimed at assuring adequate supplies of principal candidates should focus more on creating better conditions for leaders and providing the right incentives.**

If anything is clear from these findings, it is that the "shortage" problem is, at its heart, a problem of *conditions*. Certain schools, and certain districts, are struggling to attract enough certified principal candidates — often in competition with more well-heeled neighboring districts — because the working conditions are seen as too forbidding, the chances for success too slim, and the incentives, including salaries, don't adequately compensate for the added stresses and growing challenges of these leadership positions.

As with other aspects of the "principal shortage" story, the conditions challenges — and their appropriate solutions — are local and regional in nature. In New York State, for example, new principals' salaries in urban districts tend to be relatively low and average only slightly more than those of experienced teachers. The University at Albany researchers summarized it this way:

> "Salaries may be an important piece in the puzzle of recruiting and retaining more highly-qualified school leaders, especially in high-needs, low-performing schools. Our analysis indicates that with respect to salary, whether measured in absolute or relative terms, urban principals in New York, especially those in New York City, have been at an increasing disadvantage over the last decade. These trends may help account for the seeming paradox of reportedly small and weak applicant pools for leadership positions at a time when there are large numbers of individuals certified to be leaders who perform other duties." [24]

As the report notes, New York City negotiated a new contract in 2000 that increased principal salaries substantially.

These findings about "getting the incentives right" hold policy implications for states *and* districts. As the UW researchers assert, districts have considerable means at their command to ensure that disadvantaged schools get their share of principal candidates. But states have a responsibility to review policies and reallocate resources to help redress competitive imbalance *among* districts. "Without some external force adjusting the incentives among districts," the UW report argues, "the least desirable districts will be left with very limited ways in which they can try to become more competitive."[25]

- **Common district hiring practices and state policies need to be reviewed so that they are more flexible and more closely aligned with the increased expectations for school leadership.**

Times and expectations have changed for school leaders, and districts are now searching for characteristics in principal candidates "far beyond minimal state certification requirements," according to UW's researchers. Defining the shortage problem merely in terms of certified applicants, it continues, "is only part of the story. Clarifying what districts really want in school leadership applicants is the other part." [26]

It's clear, says the UW report, that districts are looking for a new and higher caliber of leader, possessing "very different capabilities than are guaranteed by the present licensing and hiring process."[27] The problem, the report continues, is a deep disconnect between what superintendents say they value most in new hires — the ability to lead and motivate staff and execute a school improvement strategy — and what typical hiring practices are delivering — aging educators picked more because they know the system than because they are likely to try to change it or make demands of it.

As the New York Study concludes, "Hiring practices over the last ten years have substantially contributed to the shortage problem being confronted today."[28]

Taken together, the three reports point to a need for superintendents and school boards to pay more attention to the hiring practices of human resource departments to ensure that those practices are in closer synch with the changing demands of school leadership. At the state level, licensure requirements and other policies that place unreasonable or insurmountable barriers to non-traditional candidates for school leadership should also be reviewed.

BEYOND THE PIPELINE:
Creating the Conditions for Leadership Success

The national mandate to "leave no child behind" has placed the need for quality school leadership into bolder relief than at any time in our history. After more than 20 years of concerted but disappointing reform efforts, states and districts are gradually coming to recognize that it takes skilled leaders to orchestrate the changes needed to support better learning for every child. What hasn't been as widely-grasped is that it will require improvements in job conditions and incentives in public education to draw enough high quality leaders to the schools that need them most.

These three reports all lead to one conclusion. It's time to move beyond the pipeline, away from policies aimed solely at increasing the number of certified candidates, and focus far more attention and resources on reforming policies and practices to:

- Adjust incentives and working conditions to enable non-competitive schools and districts to attract qualified leadership candidates;
- Bring local recruitment and hiring practices into line with heightened expectations for principal performance; and
- Redefine the job itself in ways that allow principals to concentrate on student learning above all else.

NOTES

1 Jacques Steinberg, "Nation's Schools Struggling to Find Enough Principals," *The New York Times*, 3 Sept. 2000, 1

2 Michelle A. Thompson, "Understanding the Job of a School Principal: A Study of Current Principal Practices and Principal Preparation" (report from the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, November 2002), 3

3 National Conference of State Legislatures, "Candidate Pool and Recruitment," (an issue brief by the NCSL Task Force on School Leadership, 2002), 1

4 Susan Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?: An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers* (RAND Education, 2003), 1

5 Marguerite Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly A Shortage of School Principals?* (Center on Reinventing Public Education, Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, 2003), 45

6 Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson et al., *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership* (Public Agenda, 2001), 23. As Gates et al. note in the RAND report, similar concerns about the quality of principal candidates were raised in a 1998 survey of superintendents by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary Schools.

7 Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?*, 9-10

8 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 11-14. The study team surveyed 83 districts in 10 hard-hit regions around the country reporting shortages. It followed up the survey with 150 phone interviews to determine how hiring practices responded to changing demands for candidates. The study also drew from a separate survey of 82 large-district superintendents to determine the perspectives of superintendents on desirable attributes and experiences of new principals. The team further supplemented its findings using federal databases including the Schools and Staffing Survey, and the Common Core of Data.

9 Frank C. Papa Jr., Hamilton Lankford and James Wyckoff, *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals: Implications for Improving Policy* (University at Albany, SUNY, 2002), 6. The study team relied on a set of administrative data that includes information for every teacher and administrator employed in a New York public school at any time from 1970-71 through 1999-2000. The core data comes from the Personnel Master File, part of the Basic Education Data System of the New York State Education Department.

10 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 18

11 Papa et al., *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals*, 13

12 Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?*, 61

13 Papa et al., *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals*, 8

14 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 24

15 Ibid., 25

16 Ibid., 27

17 Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?*, 15-17

18 Ibid., 17

19 Ibid., xvii

20 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 37-38

21 Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?*, 64

22 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 39

23 Gates et al., *Who is Leading Our Schools?*, xvii

24 Papa et al., *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals*, 16.

25 Roza et al., *A Matter of Definition*, 50

26 Ibid., 31

27 Ibid., 50

28 Papa et al., *The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals*, 13

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A Matter of Definition: Is there Truly a Shortage of School Principals? can be ordered in print for $10, or downloaded for free, from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington. Contact: www.crpe.org.

Who is Leading Our Schools?: An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers, by RAND Education, is available in print for $28.50 from Distribution Services at RAND: (310) 451-7002; or fax (310) 451-6915; or email: order@rand.org Copies can be downloaded for free at http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1679/.

The Attributes and Career Paths of Principals: Implications for Improving Policy, by University at Albany, SUNY, is available electronically at www.teacherpolicyresearch.org. Hard copies can be ordered by writing to:

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